The Effects of Humor on the Processing of Word-Of-Mouth

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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14731/volumes/v36/NA-36

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ABSTRACT
Exploratory qualitative analysis of 127 actual on-line conversations revealed the presence of humor in word-of-mouth (WOM). This use of humor seemed to weaken the impact of the WOM advice. While there is a rich history of research on the impact of humor on advertising, there is no equivalent research in the WOM literature. Using a 2x2 experimental design, the impact of humorous WOM on behavioral intentions, WOM intentions, evaluations of source credibility and evaluations of message persuasiveness are analyzed. Humor was found to decrease the impact of positive and negative WOM messages.

“At its most basic level humor is an intended or unintended message interpreted as funny. Yet curiously, the communication field has only skimmed the surface of the world of humor.” (Lynch 2002, p. 423)

For almost 35 years, marketing research has acknowledged the impact of humor on message processing. This research has focused primarily on the role of humor in advertising and its impact on message persuasiveness, source credibility and behavioral intentions. In contrast, research on word-of-mouth (WOM) has focused on neutral, positive or negative WOM comments. This paper will provide a literature base for future humor research in WOM.

Humor in Advertising
Since Sternthal and Craig’s pivotal article (1973), there have been numerous articles that have analyzed various implications of humor in advertising. As Duncan (1979) notes, learning theory suggests that humor should positively impact advertising results through increased distraction, higher arousal, positive conditions and increased source credibility:

“Advocates of humor in advertising argue that light-hearted copy secures audience attention, increases advertisement memorability, overcomes sales resistance, and enhances message persuasiveness.” (Duncan 1979, p. 286).

While some studies have found a positive relationship between the use of humor and ad results (c.f. Madden & Weinberger 1984), there are mixed results overall. In fact, the impact of a humorous message seems to be contingent on who receives the message:

“If humor is used in a persuasive communication, its function may also vary depending on how humor is processed by the message recipient.” (Zhang & Zinkhan 2006, p. 114).

Message Persuasiveness
While the impact of humor on message persuasiveness has been studied (Weinberger and Gulas 1992). Duncan and Nelson (1985), for example, found that humor in radio ads had positive impact on lower-order processes like attention, but weakened persuasion. Other studies found that humor increased message persuasion because it reduced resistance to the message (Lammer et al 1983, Zhang1996).

More common, however, were studies that support Sternthal and Craig’s (1973) proposition that humor may, in theory, increase persuasiveness, but that it does not appear to influence actual persuasion when compared to serious appeals because of the moderating impact of other variables (Booker 1981, Madden and Weinberger 1984). In fact, much of the past research has found indirect effects that moderated the impact of humor such as the need for humor (Cline, Altsch and Kellaris 2003), liking of the ad (Gelb and Pickett 1983), the need for cognition (Zhang 1996) and the attitude towards the ad (Zhang and Zinkhan 2006).

Source Credibility
The impact of humor on source credibility is far less studied and yet the same mix of results exists (Weinberger and Gulas 1992). While Sternthal and Craig (1973) found that “Humor tends to enhance source credibility,” (p.17), the only other study found that advertising executives, both researchers and creative directors generally did not agree (Madden and Weinberger 1984).

Behavioral Intentions
There is also mixed support for using humor to increase the likelihood of message recipients intending to follow the advice in the message. One study found that humor did, in fact, increase intentions to purchase the product (Perry et al 1997). In contrast, Gelb and Pickett (1983) and Duncan and Nelson (1985) found an opposite effect. Madden and Weinberger (1984) found mixed support for the impact of humor on purchase intention amongst advertising executives. In a study of humor in promotion for events, Scott, Klein and Bryant (1990) found that humor increased attendance at social events, but had no impact on business event attendance.

Word-of-Mouth Intentions
Only one study analyzed the impact of humor in advertising on word-of-mouth intentions. Perry et al (1997) found that humor increased the likelihood that the message recipient would pass on the message to other consumers.

As the preceding highlights, despite 35 years of research, the impact of humor in advertising remains unsettled. As Weinberger and Gulas (1992) note:

“Though the broad question of humor’s effectiveness in advertising is unanswerable, we can compile the accounts of humor research in the proper constraints to gain insights about its effects.” (Weinberger and Gulas 1992, p. 35)

Following this line of reasoning, this article will acknowledge imperfect understanding of humor, and expand research to humor in word-of-mouth messages.

Word-of-Mouth
For over 50 years, WOM has been actively researched (Brooks 1957) and yet there is general agreement that the research is incomplete (c.f. Bowman & Narayandas 2001, Wangenheim 2005).

In general, WOM has been found to provide an easy, credible source of information and more effective than ads (c.f. Goldenberg, Libai & Muller 2001). Research has also found that individuals turn to strong-tie, rather than weaker social connections (Brown & Reingen 1987, Gilly, Graham, Wolfinbarger & Yale 1998, Goldenberg, Libai & Muller 2001, Yale & Gilly 1995).
Research indicates that there are many reasons for consumers to participate in WOM discussions. Some participate post-consumption, and want to discuss their experience. Others participate pre-purchase and want to better their purchase decision.

Post Consumption Word-Of-Mouth

Post consumption research has focused on within the consumer complaint literature. This research has examined how service failure increases the likelihood of complaining to the service provider and to other consumers. One of the prime drivers of WOM is the desire to complain about a service failure (Bone 1995, Halstead 2002, Maxham & Netemeyer 2003, Maxham & Netemeyer 2002, Maxham 2001, Nyer & Gopinath 2005, Richins 1983).


Pre-Consumption Word-Of-Mouth

Consumers cannot know everything and so must turn to others for advice and information. In general, this research has found that positive and negative WOM messages have different impacts on consumers—with negative being more effective (DeCarlo et al 2007, Wangenheim 2005).


Interestingly, negative WOM has been found to result in stronger perceptions of source credibility (Godes & Mayzlin 2004).

Humor in Word-of-Mouth

It is not surprising that humor would exist within WOM messages. As Lynch (2002) notes: “Jokes and humor, in general, play an important part in determining who we are and how we think of ourselves, and as a result how we interact with others.” (Lynch 2002, p. 425)

EXPLORATORY RESEARCH

Given the importance of humor within the communication process, it can be expected that it will impact the message exchange within WOM conversations. As such, exploratory qualitative research was undertaken to understand the role of emotions and humor in WOM.

Internet based WOM has become increasingly used in consumer research (Chevalier & Mayzlin 2006, Dellarocas 2003, Godes & Mayzlin 2004, Goldenberg, Libai & Muller 2001, Gruen, Osmonbekov & Czaplewski 2006, Mayzlin 2006, Phelps et al 2004,). In keeping with this line of research, electronic WOM was used in the exploratory research. Prior qualitative research indicated that online home improvement forums contained ample electronic WOM conversations (Bussiere 2000), so 127 naturally-occurring online conversations from the internet newsgroup alt.home.repair were analyzed. The conversations varied in length from two comments to over 40 comments. Some conversations included over 20 individuals. All conversations dealt with home improvement issues.

The conversations were analyzed for evidence of any emotion or mood that moved the word-of-mouth message away from a neutral statement. The impact on the flow of conversation was then analyzed. The primary focus of the analysis was the tone of the WOM advice rather than the advice seeker. Samples of the complete text were also coded by two additional researchers to assess reliability.

Findings

Approximately a quarter of messages included elements of humor. This not only altered the tone of the conversation, but also resulted in further use of humor or, at times, angry responses to the humor. In the following conversation, the humorous comment seems to be intentional and seems to seek to make the other participants smile or comment.

After a 264 word question about his furnace, Edge concludes (Conversation 3):

Have I got a faulty thermostat or is there something wrong down at the furnace?
Thanks a million-Edge

The conversation maintains a focus on the question, and yet the humor also becomes an integral part of the conversation. Participants even began using emoticons (e.g. :-) the sideways smile) to make sure that the comment was being understood as humor.

ANSWER 1: You should have 24 volts ac. (measure again with the meter in the ac mode). If the voltage is still low, check the wiring for a bad connection. this can cause an intermittent problem) > Thanks a million -
No problem, just send a half a million, please!!! :-) (want the address to send it???)Better yet, I’ll pick it up personally. :-)(wouldn’t want it to get lost in the mail) :-)
RESPONSE TO ANSWER: Thanks for the tip! It was a loose wire, where the thermostat connects to the gas valve. Hmmm. Half a million? Maybe I can talk you down?
COMMENT FROM OBSERVER: Do what everyone else does—just don’t pay.
Christopher

Similarly, a request for help in hanging wallpaper resulted in the following comment (Conversation 29):

Use longer nails?

Alternatively, the humor is essentially tangential to the conversation. The participants likely see it, but it does not actually influence the flow of conversation. Consider, for example, the following conversation. At the end of a conversation that actually addresses the issue, a new participant enters the conversation and takes advantage of the wording of the question to add some adult humor. The question asks about mounting a toilet flange. The final answer is less than useful (Conversation 123).

for good sex i alwayze mount it.

This tangential humor, however, can actually influence the flow of conversation. Consider, for example, the following conversation. The questioner, Stormin Mormon, begins with mild humor in describing his vehicle. More importantly, Stormin Mormon signs his question with additional references to his religion. Because
some participants have multiple postings, it is worthwhile noting the commenter’s name (Conversation 76).

**QUESTION:** Stormin Mormon
My land tank is a 87 Dodge, with the 8 engine, and has about 150K miles. Running about 8 or 9 MPG.Recently had the tune up parts. Cap, rotor, sparks, air filter, fuel filter. What else might help improve mileage?

Christopher
Learn more about Jesus www.lds.org www.mormons.org

**ANSWER 1:** Tony
Hi, You mean V8? Advancing timing as much as you can will help. Changing advance curve by trying different springs in the distributor can help changing the thermostat with hotter one (if that old engine can take it without leaking coolant) can help. Trying to get lower idle RPM can help. Tranny shift kit may help. Changing the jet in the carb, etc., etc. No new ignition wires?

**ANSWER 2:** Randd01
Jack it up and put a GMC under it!

**ANSWER 3:** Loose Cannon
Don’t think putting a GMC under it would help get better mileage. I have an older GMC ‘Gaucho’ van with a 350. What a pig on gas! Don’t know which Chrysler V8 the Stormin Mormon has in his Dodge van, but if it is the 318, the gas mileage should be better than he is getting. Had a few big old Chrysler cars with the 318 engine and got pretty good mileage out of them. Seldom, if ever had any engine problems either.

**ANSWER 4:** Randd01
My new GMC with 5.3 V8 averages 20 mpg got up to 23 on highway with automatic overdrive tranny. Way better then my 1995 GMC with 350 got.

**ANSWER 5:** Swampy
Get a few of your wives to push it

**RESPONSE TO ANSWER 5:** Stormin Mormon
Oddly enough, I’m a bachelor. But thanks for the idea.

*Note that the humor moved the conversation into a GM versus Chrysler debate. In addition, Stormin Mormon’s Mormon status elicited the multiple wife joke. In each case, the actual issue became a side issue.*

Yet, at times, humor is used to add strength to the message. The cutting aspect of the humor actually speaks to the seriousness of the issue. In the following conversation, the questioner asks about soldering a natural gas control valve. The response is humorous and serious (Conversation 118):

*Increase your life insurance two fold. Have your next of kin two counties away with copies of all important papers when you do this.*

This exploratory research indicates that the presence of humor in WOM messages can alter the flow of a conversation. Specifically, the presence of humor seems to weaken the impact of the WOM message on behavioral intentions—the likelihood that an individual who receives the WOM message will be more likely to follow the advice in a purchase decision—and on the likelihood of passing on the advice to others through future WOM.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**
Based on the literature review and the exploratory research, the following behavioral intention, WOM intention, source credibility and message persuasiveness hypotheses were developed.

**Behavioral Intentions**
H1a: Positive humorous WOM messages will evoke weaker behavioral intentions than positive neutrally-toned WOM messages
H1b: Negative humorous WOM messages will evoke weaker behavioral intentions than negative neutrally-toned WOM messages

**Word-of-Mouth Intentions**
H2a: Positive humorous WOM messages will evoke weaker WOM intentions than positive neutrally-toned WOM messages.
H2b: Negative humorous WOM messages will evoke weaker WOM intentions than negative neutrally-toned WOM messages.

**Source Credibility**
H3a: Positive humorous WOM messages will evoke weaker perceptions of source credibility than positive neutrally-toned WOM messages.
H3b: Negative humorous WOM messages will evoke weaker perceptions of source credibility than negative neutrally-toned WOM messages.

**Message Persuasiveness**
H4a: Positive humorous WOM messages will evoke weaker perceptions of message persuasiveness than positive neutrally-toned WOM messages.
H4b: Negative humorous WOM messages will evoke weaker perceptions of message persuasiveness than negative neutrally-toned WOM messages.

**METHOD**

**Participants and Design**
Participants were 492 American adults who participated in the survey as part of a paid survey panel. The design was a two (positive/negative WOM message) by two (neutral and humorous WOM) experimental design. Each participant was presented with two WOM scenarios.

**Stimuli and Procedure**
Four WOM messages were created for the experiment (a positive and negative version of the neutral and humorous messages). All stimuli were based closely on actual messages found in the 127 conversations from the exploratory research. All WOM messages were changed to a fictional brand name (Granger). In keeping with the home improvement focus of the exploratory research, all WOM messages dealt with garage door openers. Five business professors and three adult non-academics rated a total of 16 potential scenarios to ensure internal validity. Additional WOM descriptors were provided to avoid leading the responses (e.g. impatient, confused, shy, curious, etc.). The four scenarios that were used had agreement from all raters.

Participants completed the experiment online. After viewing each WOM message, participants were asked to evaluate the credibility of the source, persuasiveness of the message, behavioral intention and WOM intentions. Using existing scales ensured high reliability of the scales as is demonstrated in Table 1.

Source credibility measured the trustworthiness of the WOM message provider using a 5 item scale that focused on trustworthiness. Persuasiveness of the Message uses a 4 item scale to measure the strength of the WOM message. Behavioral Intentions measures the inclination of the message recipient to follow the advice given...
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The complete analysis of hypotheses found significant differences between neutrally-toned and humorous WOM comments. These differences are partially explained by the degree of positivity or negativity in the messages. The WOM message tone and degree of negativity have significant influences on perceived source credibility and persuasiveness of the message.

These findings have important implications for our understanding of WOM dynamics and consumer behavior. First, the findings in general indicate that word-of-mouth is a more complicated construct than previously believed. Second, it indicates that the tone of the message may be as important as the actual message. Humor generally detracts from the impact of the message.

Managers will benefit from understanding that WOM is more complicated than previously understood. This means that compa-
nies may want to spark neutral WOM comments rather than using humorous appeals to spark WOM. This is increasingly important given recent interest in viral marketing campaigns.

Future research could evaluate the ways in which these changes interact. Specifically, research that attempts to model the interactions between message positivity/negativity and message tone would provide important insight into consumer analysis of WOM messages.

Given Zhang and Zinkhan’s (2006) finding that the impact of a humorous message seems to be contingent on who receives the message, research that further investigates the recipients of humorous messages would be beneficial. As such, demographic analysis may also provide insight into the differing views of males versus females, experienced consumers versus inexperienced, and individuals with varying personal traits. Similarly, an analysis of how market mavens—those most likely to pass on marketplace advice—react to humorous WOM would be beneficial.

This research is limited by its data collection method. Online word-of-mouth messages may not be representative of off-line WOM behavior. Also, the fact that message givers were unknown to the participants may impact results. Again, this may speak to the differences between electronic WOM and traditional WOM. Also, any research based on humor is subject to differing views of the humor. While statistical differences were found, studies that replicate the findings would be useful.

REFERENCES


